

Whitefish Transportation Plan Urban Corridor Study of US 93 CAC Meeting #2 Minutes (July 16, 2007)

Introduction

The second meeting of the Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC) was held at the Whitefish Public Library conference room on Monday, July 16th, 2007 and began at 5:30 p.m. The CAC is an ad hoc committee for the Whitefish Transportation Plan and Urban Corridor Study of US 93 projects appointed by the Whitefish City Council. The following people attended the meeting:

CAC Attendees

Mary Jo Look	Citizen
Mary Person	Business Owner
George S. Gardner	Citizen
Don Spivey	Citizen
Nick Columbus	Whitefish Mountain Resort
Jerry House	Whitefish School District
Gary Stephens	Whitefish Business Owner/Heart of Whitefish
Monte Gilman	Whitefish Chamber of Commerce
Dale Duff	Citizen

Agency/Consultant Team

Karin Hilding	City of Whitefish
Sheila Ludlow	MDT Statewide and Urban Planning Section (Helena)
Jean Riley	MDT Statewide and Urban Planning Section (Helena)
Shane Stack	MDT Missoula District Office (Missoula)
Jeff Key	Robert Peccia & Associates (RPA - Helena)
Dan Norderud	Robert Peccia & Associates (RPA - Helena)
Scott Randall	Robert Peccia & Associates (RPA - Helena)

Appointed CAC members Sabine Brigetta, Shirley Jacobsen, and Bridger Kelch were not present. Nick Columbus represented Whitefish Mountain Resort and will replace Fred Jones who recently retired.

Meeting participants were provided with an agenda and other information a week in advance to support and foster discussion during the meeting.

Meeting Purpose

The purposes of this meeting were to: 1) update CAC members on the work status and project schedules for the Transportation Plan and Corridor Study projects; 2) discuss recent outreach

activities; 3) discuss several Technical Memorandums providing background information relevant to the community-wide Transportation Plan and Urban Corridor Study projects; and 4) solicit input on potential system improvements in the western portion of the study area and several other focus areas of the Transportation Plan.

Meeting Summary

Jeff Key of Robert Peccia & Associates (RPA) began the meeting and asked those in attendance to introduce themselves. Discussions then focused on the following items:

Overview of Project Status and Schedules

Jeff Key provided an update of work completed for the Transportation Plan and Urban Corridor Study projects. Mr. Key referred to a graphic listing major work tasks and the expected duration of each task. He pointed out that work is generally on schedule although the need to conduct intersection turning movement counts during the peak summer visitation period has caused some delays. The traffic counts are ongoing and should be completed near the end of July. Mr. Key explained that the timing of the CAC meeting and Public meeting #2 has slipped somewhat from the original schedule. He stated that a CAC workshop to present Transportation Plan recommendations would likely be held around the end of September.

Gary Stephens asked if Task 7 (Travel Demand Modeling of Existing and Projected Conditions) was behind schedule. Mr. Key acknowledged that work for Task 7 is not fully completed. However, the travel demand model of the existing network has been completed by MDT Planning and model runs have been made illustrating future conditions without any improvements. The task that looks at alternatives (Task 9) is in process and would desirably be completed by mid- to late-August. Task 19 should be modified to extend to the end of August.

Review of Outreach Activities

Mr. Key then summarized several outreach activities that have occurred since the first CAC and Public Information Meetings held at the end of May. These activities included meetings with the following individuals or groups:

- Gary Danzyk of Glacier National Park to discuss potential use of NPS transit vehicles in area communities
- Eagle Transit to discuss transit issues and future needs in the north Flathead Valley
- Doug Adams to discuss new local efforts to add raised medians on US 93 south of 13th Street
- Resource Agency Meeting held in Helena on May 24, 2007
- Curt McIntyre to discuss the extension of Baker Avenue to JP Road
- Jerry House to discuss school district issues and concerns

Presentation of Work To Date

Mr. Key then referred CAC members to the Meeting Materials Booklet provided prior to the meeting containing working draft copies of numerous Technical Memoranda. These memos

summarize key elements of the Transportation Planning effort and provide the results of analyses essential information that will be used to develop transportation system improvements.

Study Area Boundary Memo – Mr. Key indicated that this memo documents the study area selected for the Transportation Plan and the reasons for its selection. Jeff stated that the study area is the same as the planning area being considered in Whitefish’s Growth Policy Update. CAC members had no comments on the memo.

Goals and Objectives Memo – Mr. Key noted that the Goals and Objectives memo lists a variety of transportation goals contained in Whitefish planning documents including the existing Whitefish City-County Master Plan, Whitefish Downtown Business District Master Plan, Flathead County Growth Policy, Big Mountain Neighborhood Plan, and the Transportation Element from the City of Whitefish’s Draft Growth Policy. He stated the City’s directive to incorporate the three goals from the Transportation Element of the Draft Growth Policy and highlighted several specific objectives from the document that have influenced work on the Transportation Plan including:

- a mandate for no new development in the Monegan Road area without an additional east-west connection;
- the need to explore ideas for a new grade-separated crossing of the BNSF; and
- the need to assess an alternate western route to help alleviate traffic on US 93 through Whitefish.

Gary Stephens commented that some additional goals or reframing of language is needed. Specifically, Mr. Stephens believes an overriding community goal is to preserve and enhance the character of Whitefish. He felt the goal listed in the memo under the Downtown Business District Master Plan that says “Accommodate increasing traffic volumes without degrading downtown businesses and the retail environment” is incompatible with the local goal of preserving the character of the community. He suggested changing the objective to read something like “traffic should be moved as efficiently as possible without detracting from the downtown.” Under objectives on page 3 of the memo, it was suggested that the sixth bullet be revised to be more far reaching instead of just referring to local residential streets.

Monte Gilman questioned the need to take a look at bypass options as suggested by the Draft Growth Policy. This stimulated discussion among the group and it was generally agreed that bypasses (alternate west routes) need to be considered in the Transportation Plan to determine if the concept has merit and would provide general community benefits and help reduce traffic on US 93. This topic was discussed in more detail later in the meeting.

Socioeconomic Data, Growth Trends and Land Use Assignments Memo – Mr. Key briefly described the content of the memo and the importance of assigning land use and employment data to the Travel Demand Model. His discussion then focused on page 12 of the memo where growth rates for the community and future populations are discussed.

Jerry House commented that the use of a 2.5 persons per household rate may be low for Whitefish given his research for the Whitefish School system. He felt the persons per household number may increase somewhat in the future.

Jeff then referred the group to various graphics showing year 2030 projected dwelling units and retail and non-retail employment by Census Block in the study area. He indicated these were essential inputs for traffic modeling. Don Spivey asked what non-retail employment included and noted that many such jobs are attributed to residential areas. Jeff said these were work at home type jobs which are becoming more common.

Gary Stephens questioned the amount of retail employment attributed to the downtown area and felt it did not correlate to that projected for the area in the Downtown (WB-3 Zone). Gary cited a recognized employment statistic of 9 Full Time Employees (FTE) per 10,000 square feet (SF) of retail space and said that 144,000 SF of new retail space is called for in the Downtown Master Plan. Gary suggested that the number of retail jobs assigned to the downtown area may be on the order of 1,300 new retail jobs.

Note: RPA followed up on this comment by revisiting the projected retail employment in the downtown area and the suggested FTE rate for retail space. The calculations showed that about 130 new retail jobs could be expected in the downtown area. The assignments of new retail employment presented for this area in the memo were shown to be consistent with projections for new retail space presented in the Downtown Master Plan. RPA provided this information to Gary Stephens on July 17 and he concurred with the employment projections for the downtown area being used in the model. RPA's employment rate amounted to roughly 13 jobs (full or part-time) per 10,000 SF of retail space.

Future Capacity Issues Memo – Jeff then directed the CAC members to the memo discussing future capacity issues. He said the memo was developed for the City of Whitefish to aid in their development of impact fees. He pointed out that the travel demand model generated traffic volumes on the local road system and it allowed calculate volume to capacity (V/C) ratios for road segments (areas between intersections). He highlighted several graphics presenting V/C ratios for road segments in the study area and a summary table highlighting roadways likely to experience capacity problems by 2030.

There were several comments from CAC members about the results shown in the table and that the results did not indicate the worst areas for traffic—particularly in the downtown area. Jeff replied that the results do not consider intersections and that another type of level of service analyses will be done to address capacity problems at intersections. He emphasized that the results are indicative of areas where problems are or will be occurring in the future if no roadway improvements are ever contemplated. Jean Riley commented that all the road segments listed in Table 1-3 on page 18 of the memo show V/C ratios exceeding 1.00. Ratios over 1.00 suggests roadways are over capacity and operating at an extremely poor level of service (LOS F). It was also pointed out that fixing intersections along these routes could substantially improve the LOS on road corridors.

Traffic Calming Memo – Jeff indicated that the Transportation Plan will include a chapter on Traffic Calming and described the purpose of such activities. Gary Stephens pointed out that the last paragraph on page 1 of the memo was not appropriate in his opinion since it implies traffic calming should only be used on lower function roads. The suggestion was made that some traffic calming techniques could be appropriate for “higher classification” roads (such as arterials) and used throughout the City to help maintain the character of the community.

Overview of the Environmental Scan – Dan Norderud indicated that work on the corridor study is ongoing and that such work includes preparing an environmental scan. The purpose of the environmental scan is to identify environmental issues or conditions that have the potential to influence the location, design or construction of improvements to US 93. He pointed out that meetings with resource agencies occurred in May 2007 and summaries of the meetings can be found in the Meeting Materials Booklet.

US Highway 93 Bypass Review – Jeff Key indicated that work directives for the Transportation Plan require RPA to identify and evaluate potential new western routes that might help alleviate traffic on US 93. He explained that RPA revisited four potential western alignments considered in the Somers-Whitefish Final EIS. The western route alternatives were modeled to determine potential future traffic volumes on each alignment and their impacts on US 93 and parts of the local road system. Model runs were completed both with and without alternate routes in place to determine their potential to reduce traffic on US 93. The preliminary modeling showed alternate routes would attract a notable amount of traffic (typically 7,000-15,000 vehicles in 2030); however, significant traffic volumes would likely continue on the existing US 93 corridor.

Mary Person related that considerable discussion about a bypass was heard during the development of the Growth Policy. Concerns were expressed over the amount of construction-related heavy trucks on the US 93 corridor destined for ongoing developments in the Whitefish area. Mary also raised the idea of continuing the Kalispell Bypass and developing an entirely new route offering an alternate north-south route to US 93.

Mary Jo Look commented that any bypass that is considered should connect at Highway 40 to have any chance of attracting through trucks. She also felt people would not want to “backtrack” (travel south on US 93) to access a westerly route like Alternative A.

Mary Person commented that the intersection of US 93 and Blanchard Lake Road (at Coffee Traders) is a concern and that it is particularly difficult to see the intersection during the winter. Jeff acknowledged the comment and indicated that a turning movement count will be performed at the intersection during July.

In general, the group felt Alternative D (Karrow Avenue) would be “politically impossible” in Whitefish and the neighborhood’s successful past resistance to new development proposals confirms a high level of engagement along the corridor. Alternative B, a route requiring a crossing of Blanchard Lake, may not be viable due to community Lakeshore Protection ordinances and likely opposition from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Alternative A does not connect to Highway 40 and its distance from the city may not attract much local traffic. Of the alternatives presented, Alternative C would probably be the most favorable since it follows a BPA powerline corridor. Mary Person pointed out that Alternatives B and C pass through the Blanchard and Lost Coon Lake area and both have the potential for substantial wildlife and wetland impacts.

There was discussion about whether the word “bypass” should be used. The group generally agreed that it may be best to refer to such options as western alternate routes. Karin Hilding felt the Transportation Plan needs to identify important future road connections and emphasize the need for and the long-term benefits of making such connections.

Jerry House commented that while discussing routes around the west side of Whitefish, it is important to recognize that other areas of the communities also have needs for alternate routes. He cited the need for new connections for those living on the north side of Whitefish. The group agreed with Jerry's comment and that the Transportation Plan should address needs in all areas of the community.

Other Items Discussed

Jeff Key identified several emerging topics that will need to be considered in the Transportation Plan. These items are discussed below.

Baker Avenue Extension. Jeff indicated he had met with a local business owner regarding a proposal to extend Baker Avenue from its current end point to JP Road. Extending Baker Avenue southward would provide an alternate access route into businesses and land uses along US 93 south. Don Spivey was aware of this proposal and suggested that such a route might be best developed following the zoning boundary.

Raised Medians for US 93 South. Jeff stated he had recently talked with Doug Adams about a proposal to install raised and landscaped medians on US 93 from Highway 40 to 13th Street. He showed a set of preliminary concept plans. Don Spivey, a member of the committee for this effort, provided the group with a history of the local efforts to get medians installed on US 93 and stated the group will seek an endorsement of the proposal from the Whitefish City Council. Dale Duff said the median concept was presented during the development of the Somers-Whitefish EIS but the community was unsuccessful in getting the idea included with the Preferred Alternative. There was general discussion about how to address the median proposal in the Transportation Plan.

Additional Railroad Grade Separation. Jeff asked the group for ideas on where a new grade separation over the BNSF Railroad might be desirable. He pointed out that there is an existing at-grade crossing east of town on 2nd Street but enhancing the crossing is unlikely. He offered several potential locations for a new grade separation such as Columbia Avenue and the East Texas Avenue/Pine Avenue area. Don Spivey suggested a new crossing in the Cow Coulee area. The group expressed concern that a crossing in the Columbia Avenue area would be undesirable since there is a potential to generate lots of traffic in a residential area. Gary Stephens indicated there is a real need for another way to and from Big Mountain.

City Beach Area Circulation. Jeff indicated the City of Whitefish had asked RPA to review traffic circulation and parking issues in the City Beach area. Seasonal traffic volumes, narrow roadways and steep grades on some local streets, and the parking situation contribute to congestion and pose safety concerns for pedestrians and bicyclists in the area. Jeff highlighted these issues and asked for comments from CAC members. Don Spivey stated the Bike Committee had recommended that a one-way loop for traffic be established in the area to help improve safety. Karin Hilding described known circulation and parking issues near City Beach and pointed out a retaining wall along one of the roadways has started to fail. Jeff said RPA will take a detailed look at this area and will develop several improvement ideas that can be considered as part of the Transportation Plan.

Next Meeting Date

Jeff asked the group about a likely date for the next CAC meeting. George Gardner indicated that WGM has set September 19th as the date for the next meeting on the Whitefish-West project. After considering comments, Jeff indicated the next meeting would be scheduled for the end of September or early October. He will contact CAC members with several dates during that time and set the next meeting date. He also pointed out that the next meeting will be a workshop to discuss preliminary recommendations and could require between 2 and 4 hours to complete.

The meeting concluded at 7:45 p.m.

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